

How to Desert A Friend

When you are deserting a friend, the first step is a little difficult. But pretty soon it gets easy.

What makes it hard in the beginning is that the friend doesn't seem to understand what is going on. He can't get it into his head that you are really walking out on him.

The fellow comes up to you, at the start, with a big smile on his face. He says that he has a chance to fulfill the dream of his life, and that he knows you will give him a hand, because you have been promising him for years that you would. So would you just say a word to this new friend of yours who is kicking him around and blocking his way?

But things have changed. You have deals cooking with the new friend and you don't want him mad at you.

So you don't really answer, just mumble a few embarrassed words. But he keeps tugging at your sleeve, not understanding, and a crowd gathers.

Then you have to come out with it. You tell your friend he is living in the past, and what's more, getting in the way of the big deals by hanging around bringing up old promises.

You turn to everybody and say leave it to me: one of these days my new big friend won't be so tough on this old character and in the end it will be better for him, believe me. The crowd gets bored and everybody walks away.

Just the old friend is left, staring at your back, understanding the dream is ending.

Washington's decision to walk away from its Lithuanian friend does not mean merely a delay in creating an independent Lithuania. Washington wants us to believe that's all it means. But it really means our Government has adjusted its mind to an end of the dream.

The evidence is before us. President Bush tells Lithuanians and Lithuanian Americans to go along with Mikhail Gorbachev's idea of how secession ought to work.

First there is a referendum on independence, which Lithuania might reluctantly accept even though it considers itself already free. But then there are five years of negotiation.

After that, the dead end: any proposal for independence has to be approved by a two-thirds vote of the

Washington shows all the techniques.

Soviet Congress of Deputies. Mr. Gorbachev can easily make sure that that will never happen.

The quarrel of Americans who believe in international decency should not be just with Mr. Gorbachev. Only the terminally naïve believe that he will give up parts of the Soviet internal empire without a struggle.

The quarrel is with those Americans who would rather help Mr. Gorbachev keep every inch of the ragtag empire than stand by America's pledge, repeated for a half-century, to support Lithuanian freedom lost to Hitler and Stalin.

President Bush directed the walk-out. But he is being supported by some of the specialists, journalists and ex-bureaucrats who interpret foreign policy to the public. Small countries, of course, can be annoying if you are thinking large global thoughts.

But underlying almost all the arguments in favor of the Bush decision to walk away from Lithuanian independence is a belief, frequently sincere, that otherwise Mr. Gorbachev might fall.

Sincere does not mean right. There is no proof that Mr. Gorbachev is being nasty about Lithuania only because nasty people made him do it. See above about terminal illnesses.

But if Mr. Gorbachev really needs supine American acquiescence to his bullying of Lithuania to keep him in office, he will need more of the same for a long, long time.

Around the Soviet Union, other nationalities are demanding freedom. Mr. Gorbachev's economic policies are a mess, where they exist at all. His popularity is stronger abroad than at home. And there will always be the nasties lurking.

Sooner or later, if the United States is to resume having foreign policies independent of Moscow, it will have to let Mr. Gorbachev try his luck without us. How long will Washington fight to save every inch of the teetering Soviet Union for its terrified leaders?

Mr. Bush and Secretary of State Baker both seem surprised and are worried by Mr. Gorbachev's latest threat to Lithuania — retreat or face a blockade of power supplies. What did they expect? With the United States looking on, Moscow has been tightening the screws day by day.

But perhaps there is still time, if enough Americans insist, for the U.S. to speak out for freedom of action — for the Lithuanians and for ourselves.

It is harder to walk back to a deserted friend than walk away, but in the end the heart rests easier. □